

## Chapter 211 - A Helping Hand

Kai swept his surroundings for any other mana signature: there were *only* four beasts. Peeking from a leafy shrub, he glimpsed a group of mean-looking lizards circling the soldiers near the broken tower.

*That's strange.*

They all belonged to the same species—perhaps another quirk of the spatial anomalies. Low wiry bodies armored in black scales, horned heads and swishing tails. They were similar to the drakes he fought in Veeryd, though leaner and double the size. Their veins were a shade brighter than the boar, and the largest one was comparable to the terragon.

*Still better than a giant hairy spider. Probably...*

The memory made him gag, he could faintly smell the remains of the battle wafting from the tower and his own clothes. The Space motes had fallen to ordinary levels. He'd allow the Republic to take care of the carcass as a show of good faith, they were the professionals after all.

A rumbling growl snapped his head back to the battle. The soldiers kept the drakes back with spears and shields while the Earth mages raised rocks from the ground to slow their movements. One of the smaller lizards struck too close before retreating. It was about to get skewered by a spear when the alpha flashed with mana. The soldier pulled back the attack just as the beast spewed a jet of flames at the formation.

The fire clashed over a shimmering barrier and washed to the sides of the formation. Weeds turned to ash, sludgy mud hissed and cracked. Thank Yatei, they stood in the central clearing, away from the vegetation. The last thing they needed was to start a forest fire.

*Darlo and the scholars will be overjoyed to have been left behind today.*

The expedition counted two-thirds of the troops who left the camp that morning, a few missing limbs and many bleeding wounds. It was possible some were lost in the ruins, but the death toll was heavy.

Captain Seryne shouted orders from the center of the formation surrounded by half-mages and wounded. Somehow the portly Earth shaper was there too, shaking like mango jelly. Kai didn't see Makyn, but it was hard to distinguish the faces of the frontline soldiers behind shields.

*He'll be fine. He was probably the fastest person in the summoning chamber, he must have gotten out.*

Kai couldn't contemplate any other possibility. The remaining guards had reached him outside the tower, using the breather to check the injuries they suffered during their escape.

Their team was sheltered by the vegetation, easily able to circle around the battle and find safety.

*Hmm...*

Unlike last time, he wasn't the one being chased by a beast. Kai scanned his party. There were three people at Yellow: Ferla and two old guards who had recently advanced. From the white knuckles gripping their spears, they weren't eager to test their abilities.

*Playing hero one time was enough. The Republic can deal with its own mess.*

"We should group back at camp."

"We should go help them." Valela scowled at him.

"Do we have to? They got it handled, we'll just complicate things. And how are we going to block those flames if they attack us? My mana is running low, and a shield isn't going to cut it."

Ferla gave a look that skimmed on approving. "I'm with the apprentice on this one, miss. This area isn't safe. I've lost my spear against the boar, and we don't have the might to provide assistance without risking further losses." She swept her gaze on the fight. "The military claimed command of all combat matters, they can handle those themselves. Our duty is to oversee the investigation on behalf of the council, we need to report what happened."

The guards looked pale at the idea of rejoining the fray. Instead of rebutting, Valela turned pensive and examined their group. Her emerald eyes lingered on him. "Can you tell if the spatial anomalies will spread to the surface?"

*Oh, boy. Why couldn't she just be a cold-hearted schemer?*

"Give me a second." He did another sweep of their surroundings and pushed Mana Sense inside the tower. "From the ambient mana, it looks like it's staying underground, but I can't say for sure. I don't know spatial theory, I followed my danger sense to get us out."

"Your Danger Sense?" Ferla narrowed her eyes. "Mine couldn't predict the location of the tears till they appeared."

Kai chewed his cheek. "Mine is at Yellow... and works with Favor."

The revelation sent a wave of gasps and whispers among the guards. He had to give something to conceal his Space affinity, and it was obvious he had a danger sensing skill after he had warned them in the summoning chamber. The Favor part would make the story believable. It was a given that anyone born at the bottom of Red would have a high seventh stat if they advanced quickly.

He hadn't given away anything that a clever observer couldn't deduce by themselves. The point of concealing his abilities was to save them for when it mattered, and he was in well over his head.

Valela didn't look surprised. "I'll send one group back to the campsite to contact the council while we provide assistance from a safe distance."

Her words calmed most of the guards—at least those that would leave. Almost every Orange guard was selected to head back, except Lou and another young islander who insisted on staying. Likely another recruit from the shady program.

Ferla wasn't pleased. "Miss, I must advise against this plan."

"I appreciate it, but you don't need to worry. I don't intend to put myself or anybody else in danger. If we manage to distract one beast and land an attack, I'll be satisfied."

Gaining the reluctant nod of her bodyguard, Valela asked the obvious question. "Kai, are you willing to stay with us? I'll take care of the flames if they attack. You don't need to fight, just warn us if you perceive anything, so we'll retreat."

"You mean more than being in a war zone?" His comment crashed on flat faces. With multiple pairs of hopeful eyes on him, he couldn't bring himself to say no. "Uh... Sure, I can do that."

"Thank you." Valela smiled, showing her relief. "I'll see that you're appropriately compensated. There will be some changes after this."

*There were a few things I wanted to buy from the orange list...*

They circled the outer rim of the site. Half of the group proceeded back towards the camp and gave their spears to Ferla. The remaining six approached the central clearing, keeping a direct route for retreat.

The fight in the ruins was in a stalemate, both sides were unwilling to commit to an attack. A drake had gotten a long slash on its foreleg, another had an arrow sticking from its eye. Despite that, Kai wasn't sure who held the advantage, and he still couldn't spot Makyn.

*Dammit.*

The soldiers were at a disadvantage since they had to endure the attacks head-on to protect the wounded and non-combatants in their midst. Earth shapers' spells were too slow to be effective against the beasts. If the mage casting the barrier ran out of mana, they'd be literally toasted, and probably lose half the expedition.

Valela stopped on the last ring of trees for cover. A tower on their left. She fumbled her bone wand, missing her earlier confidence. The princess would be their main damage dealer. They had no archers among them, and Ferla wouldn't engage unless she was forced to.

"How does that work?" Kai waved at the wand to break her tension. It was made from yellow materials and heavily enchanted, though he couldn't pierce the cloaking,

"Uh, this?" Valela looked at her magic stick. "It's a focus for casting, it makes my spells stronger and more efficient. You don't have one?"

"No." Kai pursed his lips. "I've never seen one on sale." There had been none even on the restricted list of the Republic.

"Oh... I see. Since mage artifacts require complicated enchantments, they classify as yellow weapons or higher, even when they're made for apprentices. They must be hard to find in the archipelago if you don't know the right people," she nodded to herself. "Okay, I'm ready. I'll aim at the injured one on the right."

Under the cover of the vegetation, the yellow guards nodded, preparing their spears for a throw.

"Be careful, miss." Ferla glowered at the drakes. With a grim face, she changed her grasp, ready to fling her weapon. A shroud of Shadows crept around them. "Certain beasts can perceive mana more accurately than mages. I can cloak us for a few minutes. We'll get one chance to strike, we might as well make it count."

"I apologize for making your job harder," Valela said.

The stern woman looked at her charge and fought off a smile. "That's what keeps it interesting, miss. One volley then we retreat. I'm too old for these reckless fights."

"Deal." Valela bobbed her head and began chanting under her breath. "Ovym vesh ivlast—" Kai soon gave up trying to memorize the words, it all sounded like gibberish to him.

*It's kinda slow, though it might be effective if you have a cover or frontline.*

Blue motes gathered on her wand. They were a shade lighter than Water, their swirls slower and sharper. Valela must have a main affinity for Ice that swallowed the one for Water.

*She also used Fire against the toad. And maybe Light? I didn't hear her casting when she summoned her shining wisps in the tunnels.*

From what Virya told him, a language of power gave mages access to a wider variety of elements if they knew the words and how to pronounce them. Though the spells would still be weak without an affinity to back them up.

Kai readied his sword, hoping he wouldn't have to use it. Those drakes lacked the colossal size of the other yellow beasts he had seen, which was no benefit at all. His body wouldn't survive a direct hit anyway. Slow and heavy was better than fast and nimble.

*Why did I get roped into this again?*

Shouts of pain and fury reached his ears, the soldiers were struggling to hold the line. Kai swallowed his reluctance. Valela or not, he couldn't run away without at least trying to help—even if some of them were exploitative assholes.

While he would never like the Republic for what they had done to his home, he recognized most were just humans trying to get by. Some might deserve to get punched in the face, but not to get burned alive by a beast. Only the top of the pyramid had actual power and agency.

*Spirits, it was easier when they were just an indistinct entity I could hate.*

The injured drake on the right whipped its tail at the defenders, and its largest cousin released another torrent of flames. The mana barrier cracked under the physical strike, letting a stream of orange flames seep through. The smaller beast dismissed its torched tail with a growl.

*Shit!*

Valela took the chance to release a dazzling white comet, far denser than the one he remembered. With three snaps, Ferla and the two guards flung their spears. The projectiles whistled through the clearing.

Committed to the tail strike, the drake jerked his head back in time to eat an ice beam in the face. The freezing spell crackled on his scales when the first glowing spear hit the injured leg. The beats staggered forward, and two more poked its belly, one piercing the black scales.

*Hmm... maybe I should have joined too. Long-distance casting isn't my forte.*

Unable to open its jaws, the drake let out a strangled growl, falling towards the soldiers. Though a few hesitated, many weapons and skills flashed to take advantage of the opportunity. It wasn't going to get up again.

The three remaining beasts roared, striking the forward. Two were too far from the fallen comrade, while the alpha was unable to spew fire without a break. It charged the formation, uncaring of the spears pointed its way.

In a flare of mana, the head of one of the smaller drakes separated from its body as it retreated. The attack didn't come from the formation either. Observing the fight through Mana Sense, Kai recognized the familiar signature.

*That's my porter! I'll give you a raise.*

Makyn turned to face the second drake. The cheeky bugger must have been waiting for an opportunity to strike again. He had a long cut on the side of his blood-soaked uniform—too precise to not be the result of a spatial tear.

*He should have listened to—.*

Hallowed Intuition flared to life, rumbling in his mind. “Retreat!”

Instead of fighting to avenge its pack, the alpha turned to flee without caring for its last member. Naturally, it chose their direction. Kai could swear its burning eyes set straight on him before he turned to run.

*I didn't even attack.*

“Wait—” Ferla scooped Valela and disappeared into a flutter of Shadows. The other yellow guards had already turned their tail, while Lou and the native girl had been waiting further back.

Kai could read Lou's hesitation in his mana flow, he could catch up to them, though that would hardly help. “Run left!”

The soldiers were following the beast at a slower pace. Brimming with Empower, Kai turned a few degrees right. The drake aimed for him, eating his head start.

*Oh, well. Just another day at work.*

He jumped into an ivory window and landed in a roll. Noticing the turbulent mana and spatial tears underground, Kai boosted his leg to leap into the upper floor. He was about to get to the top of the tower when Hallowed Intuition told him better. A stream of flames flew from a window.

Positioning against a wall, a simple water barrier took care of the rest. The shield boiled and hissed, but easily held. Since the drake went through the trouble of heating the water, Kai sent it back when a scaled head poked through the window.

The attack was timed with the whispers of danger, spilling over the beast's eyes and snout before it could leap back. It crashed backward into a tree, roaring in pain.

*Honestly, you could have just gotten away without stopping for a snack.*

He stuck his hand out to send a volley of icicles before the drake could get back on its feet.

*Just for good measure.*

A flash of mana bolted towards the beast and left a sword through its skull.

*You must really love waiting for an opening.*

Makyn stepped back from the thrashing drake. The injury at his side wasn't bleeding, but he looked deathly pale. "Are you okay?"

"I should be the one to ask you that. Here, I'll lend you mine." Kai threw down his sword. By the time he descended the tower, the beast had gone silent, and he had a notification blinking. His faithful porter waited for him with a bloody blade.

"Thanks, the lease will cost you just half the kill." Kai grinned and offered him a potion.

Makyn stared back with not a hint of humor. "I'm fine. I already took one."

"Well, this one's for blood loss. And don't tell me you don't need it."

The soldier examined the potion for a second before drinking it. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, I can't have my employee die on the job. By the way, I was joking about the sword. I'll be fine with twenty-five percent." Kai patted his shoulder. "Though the potion is another twenty-five percent, that's premium quality."

"Just cut the nonsense, and say it already," Makyn grumbled, leaning against the tower.

"What do you mean... oh, *that*. Yes, I did tell you this would end badly half a dozen times. I mean, it could have gone worse."

"How?"

"Hmm... I don't know. You could have blown up the summoning chamber or destroyed the other one too."

Makyn scrunched his brows. "And how would we know if that happened?"

"Well..." Kai pushed his sensing skill through the ground and inspected the raging mana swirled underneath. Spatial rends cut into the ivory stone. "I think we better leave."